

### *Lifeworks*

## Soul searching

There's an inevitable intimacy that develops when one looks at the photographs of Andrea Modica. Perhaps it's the luminescent quality and small scale of her prints that force the viewer to bond with her images. Or perhaps it's the doting attention she gives to her subjects that enables us to lose ourselves in their stories. Either way, whatever the subject, her images always engage us in narratives that allow us to share in a wider vision. This blanket of intimacy extends into Modica's recent work, *Human Being*, which premiered at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York City from May 10 to June 30 this year.

Working alongside scientists, Mod-

ica spent over a year photographing skulls unearthed on the grounds of the Colorado Mental Health Institute in Pueblo, Colorado. In 1993 prison inmates breaking ground for a new hospital wing discovered the skeletons of 100 people secretly buried in a mass grave a century ago. A monograph accompanying the exhibition includes descriptions by forensic anthropologist Michael Hoffman of the skulls' evidence of syphilis, dental abscesses and mental retardation. Although Modica's artistic examination is equally precise, it takes a dramatically different direction.

To make her images, Modica uses an 8" × 10" view camera; this cumbersome equipment, and the slow working

pace that it requires, compliments the thoughtfulness and contemplative imagination with which she approaches her subject. Paradoxically, Modica has noted that it was because of the formality and precision of her images that the skulls began to take on a more human aura. This humanness is in striking contrast to the scientific language used to describe the skulls. The forensic description of *A15: male, 56 years old*, for example, tells us that there is a lesion involving the bone above the left front teeth, "probably the result of an abscess." However, Modica's image stares in quiet contemplation. There is a desperation in the sad tug of the eyes. This is a portrait, not a record of physi-

cal remains. Repeatedly we see that while medical examination attempts to reconstruct some aspect of physicality, Modica's examination manages to reestablish the presence of a soul.

Unfortunately, reproductions of these works do not come close to expressing the warmth and breadth of the original photographs. The platinum-palladium process that Modica uses in making her 8" × 10" contact prints produces a greater tonal range than can be achieved in the silver prints more commonly used in black-and-white photography. The beauty of *C4: male, 39 years old* lies in the delicate subtlety of the surface texture, the pattern and the flow of the suture lines. This beauty and softness counteracts our more instinctive reaction to these images. Nonetheless, like the "vanities" of 17th-century still-life painting, the skulls force us to contemplate the inevitability of death.

Modica has gained widespread acclaim for her masterful ability to find beauty in difficult subject matter. She made her name with an ongoing series of photographs published under the ti-

tle of *Treadwell*. This work follows an overweight, impoverished young girl and her family from rural America as they struggle to subsist. Modica turns that same empathy to the contemplation of these skulls and our fears of death.

In a time when the predominant method of dealing with thoughts of death and dying is to put them out of mind, Modica's work echoes the 19th-century practice of creating *memento mori* by photographing the dead on their deathbeds or in their coffins. Similarly, Modica photographed these skulls on the ordinary cardboard boxes in which they were stored when she first encountered them. These skulls become a *memento mori* of anonymous



**Andrea Modica, *C4: male, 39 years old*.** Platinum-palladium print, 8" × 10". "Superior view of cranium resting on its right side ... . The cross-shaped pattern of sutures is caused, in this case, by the failure of the two developing halves of the frontal bone (to the right) to fuse together into a single bone, leaving what is called a 'metopic' suture, an infrequent, but normal, variation whose frequency varies in different populations. The frontal bone makes up the forehead."

people, people who ended up in an asylum and whose bodies went unclaimed after their deaths. Modica not only demonstrates a reverence for each death, but also respect for the person that was. Backed by her fantasies of lives that we will never know in any other way, her photographs allow us to rebuild the imaginary and to invent the stories behind these remains — not only of their physicality, but of their dreams, desires and pleasures.

*Andrea Modica is a graduate of Yale University. She has been a Guggenheim Fellow as well as a teacher at the International Center of Photography in New York. Her work has been collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, as well as by private collectors worldwide. A monograph of this work, Human Being, has been released by Nazraeli Press. A selection from this exhibition can be found at [www.houkgallery.com](http://www.houkgallery.com). Andrea Modica is represented exclusively by Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York.*

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**Andrea Modica, *A15: male, 56 years old*.** Platinum-palladium print, 8" × 10". "Frontal view of cranium with some postmortem damage seen in several cracks and small areas of missing bone. Although difficult to see in this particular photograph, this person has a well-healed fracture of the tip of the nose ... and a lesion involving the bone just above the sockets for the individual's left front teeth, probably the result of an abscess ... ."